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ABSTRACT

This report presents information from a national survey commissioned by the Public Education Network and Education Week of registered American voters and from focus group interviews, assessing the extent to which the public is supporting or failing public schools. Americans report having only 3 hours or less per week to help improve public schools. They believe that what they can and should do is better perform their traditional civic duties. Half of the respondents would like to be more involved in education issues, though they offer persuasive reasons why they cannot. Americans are concerned for all children and believe the nation should guarantee quality public education for every community and child. A majority consider ensuring quality public education to be the nation's highest public priority. Americans believe that schools are the heart of local communities, and many define their communities by their neighborhood public schools. Americans are prompted to act to improve schools more by dire circumstances than by the daily challenges of raising school and student performance. Most surveyed believe that improving teacher quality is a more effective solution to improving public schools than equalizing resources, raising standards, or bolstering community involvement. (SM)

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Action *for* All:

The Public's Responsibility *for* Public Education

Report of findings from focus groups and a nationwide survey
The Public Education Network & *Education Week*

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Action for All:

The Public's Responsibility for Public Education

PUBLIC EDUCATION NETWORK

EDUCATION WEEK

April 2001

Public Education Network

The Public Education Network (PEN) is the nation's largest network of independent, community-based school-reform organizations. Through its 58 members in 28 states and the District of Columbia, the Network serves more than 6 million students, about 11 percent of the nation's public school children. The Network's broad reach extends to more than 8,200 schools in 300 school districts. Since 1983, almost a billion dollars have flowed through PEN's local education funds (LEFs) in support of public education. Over the last six years, LEFs have provided more than $500 million to school improvement efforts.

The Network works to educate the nation about the relationship between school quality and the quality of community and public life. Equal opportunity, access to quality public schools, and an informed citizenry are all crucial components of a democratic society. The Network's goal is to ensure that the availability of high-quality public education is every child's right and not a privilege.

Improving public school systems is the responsibility of parents, individual citizens, and whole communities. Students, teachers, and school districts all need to be held to high standards. The Network advocates for changing significantly how school systems are funded, overhauling curriculum and assessment practices, ensuring authority and decision-making at the school level, providing ongoing professional development for teachers, and engaging the public in building relationships between citizens, schools, and the communities schools serve.

Education Week

Education Week is the newspaper of record for American precollegiate education. Produced by the nonprofit Editorial Projects in Education, which is based in Bethesda, Md., this independent newspaper is now in its 20th publishing year. *Education Week* is well known for its annual *Quality Counts* report on the state of school reform in the 50 states, as well as for its award-winning coverage of news in the nation's public and private schools.

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Introduction

Turning Second-Hand Democracy Into First-Class Schools

By Wendy D. Puriefoy
and Virginia B. Edwards

Education in the United States will not improve dramatically unless Americans fulfill their civic responsibility to ensure quality public education for all.

The growing concern about public education is a uniting force in the United States that brings together every segment of our population – young and old, Democrat and Republican, white and minority, urban and non-urban – in a common cause. Americans see their public schools as the core of their communities and recognize that quality public schools have a value beyond measure. The schools are the key to our future prosperity, equal opportunity, personal success, community well-being, indeed our very democratic way of life.

The following report, *Action for All: The Public's Responsibility for Public Education*, reveals that the best way for an American to be involved in education is to become an educated voter and an education voter. It is based on a new national survey commissioned by the Public Education Network and *Education Week*. The report is designed to probe the nation's commitment to public schools and the avenues for greater public responsibility for quality education.

A vast majority of Americans attended public schools, and virtually all Americans have a deep-rooted commitment to make schools better for all children. Together, public school-educated Americans comprise one of the world's largest alumni groups. Every American, including those who did not attend public school and those who do not have children in public schools, cares about what happens in public schools and wants better results for a broader range of students.

Economic, demographic, and social changes mean that Americans face increasing demands from work and must juggle complex family responsibilities. Few Americans know what they can do to help improve schools, and most lack the knowledge, time, and inclination to bring fellow citizens together to demand improvement. Like people who inhale second-hand smoke, Americans are increasingly breathing "second-hand democracy." Americans seem content to sit back and let the advocates, experts, and educators take over, rather than raising their voices and their hands to bring about the essential changes.

Americans can and must fulfill basic civic responsibilities, and these activities—our duty as citizens—require little time and effort. By voting and being informed on issues, paying taxes, and making sure that their own children succeed, the public can help reshape the direction and results of public education.

Today, fewer than ten percent of voters actually cast ballots in school board elections. Few Americans know or can name their school board members or local school superintendent, and fewer are informed consumers of schools and school policy.

People research the stock market, hospitals, and doctors; why not schools? We believe it is every citizen's responsibility to seek out basic data necessary about their schools and the voting records of officials to hold those schools and officials accountable. Using that information, Americans can push lawmakers to take positions that support improvements in public education.

People who vote are most likely to take action to strengthen public schools. Unfortunately, those who are most concerned about education issues are among the

least likely to vote. That means public action to support education will be made more powerful if linked more directly with efforts to get out the vote. The public also must encourage candidates to stay focused on key education issues, from ensuring quality teaching to adequate resources, that people care about. In so doing, we can raise the stakes and make education not merely a top concern but a key issue—like Social Security, health care, and taxes—with measurable results through which we can hold public officials accountable.

The PEN/*Education Week* survey sought to determine the level and areas of concern for public education today, individuals' views of their civic responsibility for public education, actions they would be willing to take to improve education, the kinds of information they want about education, the sources they trust to give them that information, and key barriers that inhibit Americans from taking greater civic responsibility for quality schools.

This information can help elected officials, policymakers, educators, the public, and leaders of nonprofit and community-based organizations understand more about public attitudes toward school improvement and activities most likely to motivate and encourage civic action to improve schooling in their communities. The research focuses primarily on issues surrounding public and community responsibility for schools and young people through activities such as voting, paying taxes, and participating in community action designed to benefit all schools and young people.

In undertaking this research, the Public Education Network (PEN) and *Education Week* sought out the attitudes of recent voters, who by registering to vote have already demonstrated a sense of civic mindedness. Future polls will look at non-voters and will consider a broader range of issues related to public responsibility, such as the need for better information and the necessary structures and leadership required for effective community action.

To help build a constituency of informed citizens and voters in every community, the Public Education Network is launching a national initiative that will include efforts to build further on what we know about the willingness of the public to take on their responsibilities for schools and the effects of their involvement. Since PEN's research found that a lack of information is a major impediment to public responsibility, part of the campaign will focus on a public information and voter-mobilization strategy aimed at utilizing partnerships and activists to reach Americans.

PEN will seek to encourage communities to regain a powerful sense of ownership for the nation's schools, which will benefit young people and our communities as a whole. Meanwhile, *Education Week* (print and online) and *Teacher Magazine* will continue to serve as the most timely, reliable, and comprehensive sources of information on schools and public engagement and news developments in precollegiate education generally.

Ultimately, the civic health of our communities can only be enhanced by well-educated citizens who fully accept—and act upon—their shared public responsibility.

Wendy D. Puriefoy is president of the Public Education Network, the nation's largest network of independent, community-based school reform organizations, and Virginia B. Edwards is editor and publisher of *Education Week* and *Teacher Magazine*.

Executive Summary

In a society whose citizens have demanding family and work responsibilities, few Americans have the time, expertise, or the inclination to throw themselves into the challenge of making schools better. Like people who inhale second-hand smoke, Americans are increasingly breathing "second-hand democracy." Rather than taking major steps to address the issues that can ensure quality public schools and teaching for all young people, Americans seem content to watch a small, committed group of activists take the lead.

In fact, fewer than half of Americans say they are actively involved in public schools. Many want to help but in limited ways and often only when motivated by a life-or-death crisis.

The following report, *Action for All: The Public's Responsibility for Public Schools*, is based on a national survey of those who are registered voters—who, perhaps not coincidentally, are the Americans most likely to take civic action. The report seeks to assess the extent to which the public is supporting—or failing—its schools. In an era of accountability in public education, the report seeks to define what the public should be held accountable for. More specifically, the report is designed to provide some useful answers for educators and policymakers about a range of issues: How does the public define its own responsibility for public education? What motivates the public to act? What kind of information does the public need to become better informed, and to whom does the public look to for reliable and trustworthy information?

This report is the first product of a new partnership between the Public Education Network (PEN), the nation's largest grassroots advocacy network for school improvement, and *Education Week*, the nation's newspaper of record in precollegiate education. Each year for the next five years, PEN and *Education Week* will release a new national survey that will further explore different aspects of public responsibility for public schools.

The bad news is that Americans say they have only three hours or fewer available to them each week to do anything to improve public schools. The good news is that the public actions required to ensure that schools are improving are not that difficult, expensive, or time consuming.

What Americans say they can and should do is to better perform their traditional civic duties—becoming better informed about education, increasing the pressure on elected officials to do whatever it takes to get better results for a broader range of students, and exercising their responsibility to vote as knowledgeable education consumers.

In fact, if Americans were to do one thing that could make schools better it would simply be to become "education voters," who know the issues, know the candidates' positions, and use the power of the voting booth to improve schools.

Reform Rhetoric Has Worked

Efforts to improve public education in recent decades have been premised on the belief that all children can learn and must achieve at the highest levels. This belief—and the notion that quality public schools are increasingly crucial to the well being of our communities and young people—is deeply rooted in the public consciousness.

Virtually all Americans— regardless of political leaning, income level, race, gender, and socio-economic background—are united in the belief that we should strengthen public education for all young people, not just those in their community. Ninety-six percent of voters believe that it is practical to expect that all communities have quality public

schools and nearly all say that guaranteeing a quality public education to every child in America is practical. Public schools are the heart of communities, the poll reveals. Americans are at least five times more likely to cite public schools rather than churches, hospitals, and libraries as the most important institutions in their communities.

An Untapped Resource

The community as a whole plays an important civic role in determining the quality of public schools. How the public votes on issues, determines priorities, spends its resources, and seeks to remedy inequities shapes the direction and policy of schooling. Collective values determine what is taught and can create a culture that places a premium on education and academics in addition to other priorities.

Like the home crowd cheering at a sports event, community support for and recognition of academic achievement can be a seemingly indefinable X-factor influencing school and student performance. But dramatically changing educational outcomes for millions of young people will require much more active involvement.

In spite of the important role communities can play, few Americans perceive others in their community as taking on an active role in improving the quality of life or schools in their neighborhoods. The poll data show that the majority of voters are lukewarm about their communities' commitment to public education. Only 22 percent of voters say people in their community are taking "a lot of" responsibility for insuring quality public schools. An additional 47 percent perceive that their community members are taking "some" responsibility, but about 51 percent say they are not involved in making schools better themselves.

When asked about specific civic actions to improve public education, voters say they are less likely to do anything (including writing letters, participating on committees, or going door to door) that they see as requiring time, skills and knowledge they may not have. Meanwhile, fewer than two-thirds of citizens say they are more likely to take actions that require little commitment, including voting or signing a petition.

Consumers Rather than Advocates

Americans are not advocates for better schools, but they can be intelligent consumers of information about education quality and school policy. Americans are not experts on education and look to knowledgeable people for this information. Most trust those closest to the issues a great deal or a lot and look to teachers, parents, the PTA, and principals to deliver the information. They trust least the local newspaper, business leaders, and elected officials (other than school board members).

More and better information about school and teacher quality and resources is essential to give busy Americans what they need to make good decisions. The poll indicates that Americans would appreciate comparisons among schools on various measures of quality, including test scores, graduation and college-attendance rates, and teacher credentials.

Breaking the Time Barrier

The poll findings suggest ways in which citizens can be mobilized in the time they have available to support quality schools. These efforts are largely focused on traditional civic responsibilities for schools, including ensuring that their children succeed, paying taxes to support public education, becoming as informed as possible about education issues, and pressuring elected officials to fix the schools. These are all actions that can be done in a few hours per week.

Significantly, Americans understand the difference between the kind of responsible civic action that is a public responsibility and necessary to bring about large-scale change and individual efforts, such as volunteerism and charity. The public is significantly less likely to say that their responsibility for

schools includes volunteering in schools or giving money to organizations that work to improve public schools.

Americans are most likely to be motivated to take action for public education as a result of a crisis. Slightly more than half of Americans would be very or extremely likely to take action only if there was a shooting or a threatened state takeover in their schools. By comparison, about 45 percent say they would take action because of funding cuts.

Rather than taking major steps to engage the issue of quality public schools, Americans seem content to watch a small, committed group of activists take the lead.

Teacher Quality, Resource Issues Most Important

Most Americans say the highest priority for improving education should be improving teacher quality, followed by creating more equitable resources among rich and poor schools. Minorities, particularly African Americans, say that addressing the resource problem should come first.

Americans are particularly concerned that young Americans are not learning what they need to succeed. Information that most motivates adults to act focuses on teacher quality and test scores. They clearly worry about indicators that other children, not just their own, are in trouble. Americans are most concerned by the fact that about a quarter of high school seniors today score below the average eighth grader on national reading tests, followed by the fact that over a quarter of new teachers have not met the requirements for licensing, and that nearly half of urban students perform below the basic level on national reading tests.

Public Responsibility vs. Parent Involvement

The report reveals that we cannot turn to those we have traditionally relied on to make public schools better for all children.

Not so long ago, parents constituted more than half of all adults. It was assumed that parental action was public action. The schools catered to the will of a community of often like-minded parents. Today, the challenges and the demographics have changed. Today, parents constitute only about a third of all adults. Many are single parents, and many adults are working longer and more irregular hours than previous generations. Those who are most inclined to support schools—a small group of committed parents—are the hardest pressed to become more involved and the least likely to take civic action.

To meet the growing needs of young people in our most disadvantaged communities requires that all adults across the community learn more about what is happening in schools and advocate for higher-quality teachers, more equitable funding, better accountability, and safer schools.

The poll reveals that the most likely Americans to take an interest in supporting school improvement include college-educated, married, upper-income, and younger adults, and parents of children under 18. Meanwhile, the desire to take civic action for education appears to decrease as people get older. A greater percentage of those under 45 said they were extremely or very likely to take specific actions than did those over 45.

Today, it is the responsibility of *all* Americans, not just those with children in school, to take greater interest in the education of *all* children. Today, we need to move beyond traditional efforts to volunteer to help one classroom or school and pursue more community-oriented, change-focused efforts that can have a more powerful impact on all children and the education system as a whole. We must ensure greater community *responsibility* and action for public education.

Key Findings

Americans are concerned for all children and believe we should guarantee quality public schools for every community and every child.

• In the past, improving education was a battle for parents, who were most concerned about their child's own school, while older or childless voters focused on issues that more directly affected them. However, this survey strongly confirms a recent shift to a much broader public investment in schools. Parents are reaching out beyond their children and non-parents are rallying for quality public education for all children nationwide, acknowledging the importance of a good educational system to the future prosperity of this nation.

• Nine out of 10 Americans say it is personally important to them to ensure good public schools both locally and nationwide with a strong majority saying it is extremely important at the community level (90 percent important, 57 percent extremely). Even at the national level there is strong support (93 percent important, 58 percent extremely). Eight out of 10 voters, across all demographic and political subgroups, say it is personally important to them to have good public schools, with a majority of this group saying that it is extremely important. Virtually all Americans (96 percent) believe that it is practical to expect that all communities have quality public schools.

• Ninety-one percent of Americans say that a quality public education is every child's birthright.

Americans rank education as their most important priority.

• Not only do Americans believe that a quality public education is every child's birthright, but they continue to hold ensuring quality public education as our nation's highest public priority. When asked to choose the one or two most important issues of the day, more than a third of voters (37 percent) rank education as their top priority issue, followed by Social Security and Medicare (30 percent), health care (26 percent), the economy and jobs (18 percent), taxes and government spending (16 percent), moral values (12 percent), crime and drugs (7 percent) and trade and jobs going overseas (6 percent). While voters' priorities are dependent on age, educational level, and to some extent, parental status, even those without school-age children still rank education highly.

• Americans say that schools are at the heart of local communities. Respondents identify public schools as the "most important" local institution. They offer public schools at least five times more often than churches, hospitals, and other institutions. In addition, many individuals define the communities in which they live by their neighborhood public schools, and a quarter of voters polled say they define their communities by their local school district or school attendance zone. Respondents with or without children in the home define their communities similarly.

Americans believe that fulfilling their traditional civic duties, such as paying taxes, voting, and ensuring their children are learning, are their primary public responsibilities for public education. These are essential duties that can make other important actions, such as volunteerism and charity, more effective.

• Americans' views of their public responsibilities for education are narrowly focused on traditional and collective ways of being involved. When given a list of possible ways they might be involved in improving public schools, a quarter say that ensuring that one's own child succeeds in school is the most important individual responsibility for public education while almost as many (22 percent) identify paying taxes to support public education as the most important. Just 14 percent select becoming as informed as possible and 13 percent select pressuring officials to fix the schools. Some 11 percent of the public say that their most important public roles revolve around ensuring that they do all of these activities.

• Few Americans say that acts of volunteerism in schools (8 percent) and providing charitable donations to organizations that work to improve schools are the most important ways that they can take responsibility for schools.

The public says it is not doing as much as it can to help all young people succeed in school.

• The public says it can do more to improve schools and the quality of education for all young people: half of the respondents say they would like to be more involved in education issues. Yet, fewer than half of those surveyed say they are "very" or "somewhat" involved in helping to make public schools better, and only 16 percent say they are "very involved." Less than a quarter of voters say that members of their community take "a lot" of responsibility for ensuring quality public schools.

• But even if people say they could do more, they also offer persuasive reasons why they cannot. Americans complain that there are already too few hours in the day to meet their professional and family obligations. Two-thirds of Americans say they have three hours or fewer a week to help improve the quality of education in their communities. When probed further about why they feel they do not have the time to be more involved in public education, half of respondents (50 percent) say that they have busy work schedules, too many other obligations (10 percent), family responsibilities (8 percent), and other more important issues (5 percent).

• Because of the time crunch and a lack of expertise, Americans prefer quick and easy actions for taking responsibility for public education. When asked about specific civic actions to improve public education, voters say they are less likely to do anything that they see as requiring time, skills and knowledge that they may not have, such as writing letters (29 percent likely), going door to door (23 percent) or staffing information tables (21 percent). Instead, they are more likely to participate in short actions that require a very little extra commitment such as voting against officials wanting to cut school budgets (64 percent), signing a petition (62 percent), and talking to neighbors (42 percent).

• The poll reveals that the Americans who are most likely to take an interest in supporting school improvement include college-educated, married, upper income, younger

adults, and parents of children under 18. Meanwhile, the desire (or ability) to take civic action for education decreases as people get older. A greater percentage of those under 45 said they were extremely or very likely to take specific actions than did those over 45. Those segments of the population who show the most support for quality public education, including parents (especially mothers and those with very young children) and voters under 45, also tend to be the groups who vote less often.

Americans are prompted to act to improve schools more by dire circumstances—such as violence in schools or state takeovers—than by the daily challenges of raising school and student performance.

- Americans are concerned about many problems in the schools. When asked how different facts made them concerned about public education, nine in 10 were concerned that nearly half of students in urban districts do not get many of the textbooks and tools they need to learn (90 percent), nearly half of urban students perform below the basic level on national reading tests (89 percent), most high school seniors score near the bottom in math and science compared with students in other industrialized nations (89 percent), and that about a quarter of high school seniors today score below the average eighth grader on national reading tests (89 percent). Many were also alarmed that over a quarter of new teachers have not met the requirements for licensing (89 percent) and that, due to growing student populations, the nation will need to hire more than two million teachers in the next several years (88 percent).

- Even though they have concerns about school and student performance, however, Americans are motivated to take action only under sudden dire emergencies. It would take a serious crisis, such as a shooting or threatened state takeover, to motivate a majority (55 percent) to take action. Less than half (45 percent) would be likely to take action if there were cuts in funds that affect schools and just two out of five (42 percent) if there were overcrowding of classrooms. Young people not getting jobs or admitted to colleges and students receiving low scores on standardized tests would motivate the smallest percentage of voters to take action (37 percent).

By a nearly two-one margin, Americans believe that improving teacher quality is a more effective solution to improving public schools than equalizing resources, raising standards, or bolstering community involvement.

- Americans say their highest priority for improving education is improving teacher quality (30 percent) rather than creating more equitable resources among rich and poor schools (18 percent), raising standards for all students (17 percent), and strengthening community involvement (15 percent). However, a higher percentage of minorities, particularly African Americans, choose addressing the resource problem.

Americans need better information from trustworthy sources close to the classroom about how to make schools better.

- Americans say they do not take more responsibility for public education because they do not know enough about the problems and lack crucial information and expertise.

- Americans want information to inform their voting and hold their schools and elected officials more accountable. Voters are most interested in more information on candidates running for the school board (57 percent), comparisons among schools on various measures of quality (45 percent), school budgets (44 percent) and school board minutes (35 percent).

- Americans think the most valuable information to measure the quality of public schools in their community are information about teacher qualifications (69 percent), comparisons of school performance, including graduation and college-attendance rates (63 percent), and state report cards on school performance (58 percent). Smaller percentages said comparisons of student achievement indicators (54 percent) and percentage of students taking advanced and accelerated courses (47 percent) would be useful.

- Voters are not experts on education and look to knowledgeable people who are closest to the issues for this information. On a local level they most trust teachers (59 percent), parents (57 percent), the PTA (56 percent), school principals (51 percent), and the school board (46 percent) more than local newspapers (32 percent), business leaders (26 percent), and elected officials (25 percent).

Poll and Focus Group Findings

Public Priorities and Attitudes Toward School Performance

*The following section of the report presents detailed findings from the Public Education Network/*Education Week *survey and focus groups of Latino, African-American, and white adults.* *See methodology on page 35.*

Public Education Is the Public's Top Priority

Today, candidates for public office at every level of government want to be seen as education candidates ready to take on the ongoing challenges confronting schools. During the presidential campaign, the major candidates sought to win over the public by presenting themselves as the next "Education President." But we are also beginning to see candidates at the community, state, and national levels who have limited statutory authority over education issues ready to stake their claims as education candidates, jockeying to be the next "education mayor" and "education assemblyman."

The reason? The growing concern about public education is a uniting force in every community that every segment of our population—young and old, Democrat and Republican, white and minority, urban and non-urban—cares about deeply.

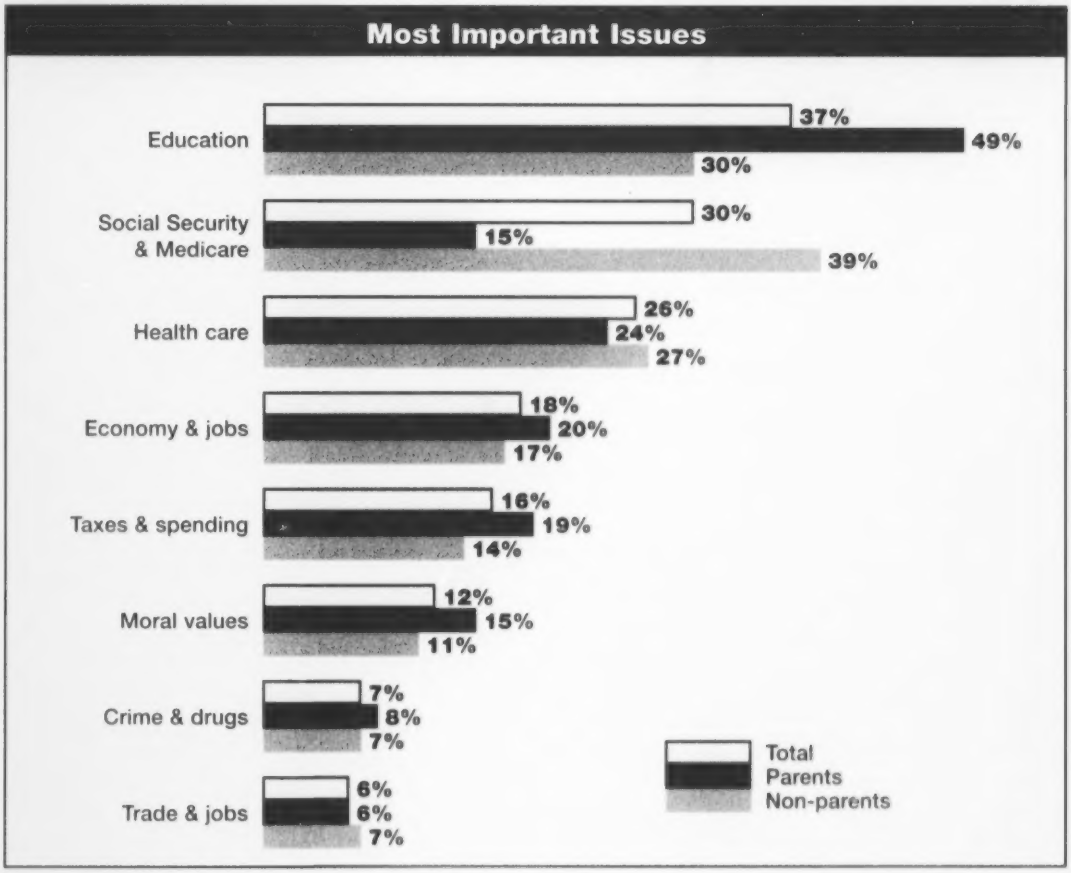
As this poll indicates, education continues to be the nation's top public concern.

Bringing their voices to the voting booths this past November, Americans had a laundry list of diverse concerns despite the booming economy. While both the Republican and Democratic candidates wooed voters with promises of Social Security, health care, and tax reform, to name just a few, voters ranked education as the most important issue in choosing a president. More than a third of voters rank education at the top (37 percent), followed by Social Security and Medicare (30 percent), health care (26 percent), the economy and jobs (18 percent), taxes and government spending (16 percent), moral values (12 percent), crime and drugs (7 percent), and trade and jobs going overseas (6 percent).

While voters' priorities are dependent on age, educational level, and to some extent, parental status, even those without school-aged children still rank education highly. Voters without children under eighteen look first to Social Security (39 percent) and then education (30 percent) compared to half (49 percent) of parents of children under 18 who put education first.

Older voters place Social Security and Medicare first (44 percent), followed by health care (30 percent) and then education (26 percent), while voters under 45 lead with education (48 percent). Importantly, less frequent voters rank education higher (46 percent) than frequent voters (36 percent) suggesting the importance of Get Out The Vote campaigns as part of a pro-education strategy.

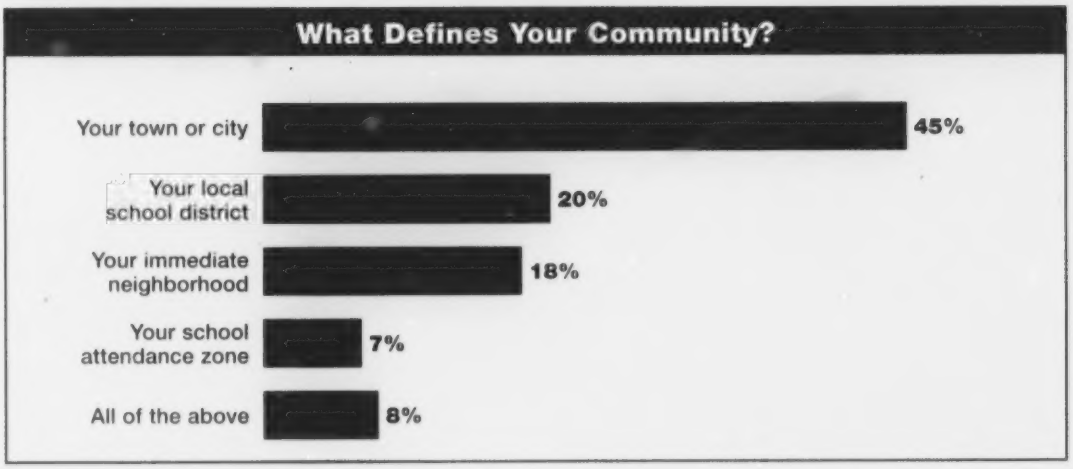
A Latino focus group participant explained, "[Education] is the future. The children are the future. They are going to be the ones administering things when we are not able to do for ourselves." An African-American participant warned that frustration with lack of job skills "breeds crime and a lot of other things.... education is the root."



Schools Are at the Heart of Communities

Not only was education on the forefront of voters' minds on election day, but it also shapes the ways in which they view their own communities as well. A plurality (40 percent) of unprompted voters name public schools as the most important public institution in their community. Voters volunteer schools five times more than any other institution including hospitals (8 percent), libraries (8 percent), and churches (6 percent). Every demographic and political subgroup looks first to the public schools. Nonetheless, importance is strongly correlated to age, and younger voters place more emphasis on the public schools than their older counterparts. Public schools are a top priority for voters regardless of partisan ties, and Democrats (46 percent), Independents (40 percent), and Republicans (32 percent) all volunteer public schools first.

In building public involvement in public education at a nationwide level and encouraging the transition from individual to com-



munal responsibility, it is important to first understand that well over a quarter of voters define their community in terms of the local public schools or school attendance zone. Forty-five percent of voters say they define their community as their town or city, followed by their local schools district (20 percent), their immediate neighborhood (18 percent), or their local school attendance zone (7 percent). Rural voters, younger African Americans, and older women are most likely to define their community by their local school district. Young voters (18-24 year-olds) are more likely than their counterparts to point to their local school attendance zones (12 percent) and 50-64 year-olds to point to their local school districts (24 percent).

While voters with or without children ages 18 or younger define their community similarly, parents of public school children are twice as likely as parents of private school children to define their community by their local school district (23 percent and 10 percent, respectively).

Interestingly, race plays a key role in voters' perceptions of community. White voters (48 percent) are significantly more likely than African-American and Latino voters (30 percent for both) to define their community by their town or city. Meanwhile African-American and Latino voters (29 percent for both) are more likely than white voters (16 percent) to define their community by their immediate neighborhood. Latinos are slightly more community-oriented and worry about the quality of public schools in their community more than African Americans and whites.

Schools are "Entrenched in the Social Fabric" of Communities

A number of focus group participants believe public schools are entrenched in the social fabric of the communities in which they are housed, and as such, communities are responsible for supporting their public schools by volunteering both their time and money. They say it is important for both parents and community members to be involved. Moreover, participants believe poor schools adversely affect their communities, whereas good schools raise property values and improve the quality of life of the community. A Latino participant said, "It's an investment in the community.... Those kids that don't go to school and don't get an education, it's going to affect you in the end."

"In public education, quality in each school is related to where it is located. We bought our house specifically to be in a certain school district, and I really like the public schools that my kids go to, but I know that if I lived somewhere else, I might not like the public schools....The school is a function of the community that it's in. If you live in a community where the parents are very involved in the school, and support it with money and time, it's a good school."
—White focus group participant

"Even if you are not the parent, you still have to take some ownership of your community.... Even though my daughter grew up, I still have to look at the children that are growing up in the community I live in. You still want the same for those children as you would for your own children."
—African-American focus group participant

Commitment to Quality Schools for All Children

In the past, quality education was a battle for parents who were most concerned about their children's own schools, while older or childless voters focused on issues that more directly affected them. However, this survey strongly confirms a recent shift to a much broader public investment in schools. Parents are reaching out beyond their children and non-parents are rallying for quality public education for all children nationwide, acknowledging the importance of a good educational system to the future prosperity of this nation. "No matter your economic strata, your race or ethnicity, every human will agree that a kid has to have an opportunity," declared a Latino man. Voters recognize the importance of public schools in preparing the nation's future political, social, and economic leaders. Only 17 percent of voters say they are personally more worried about the quality of public schools in their community compared to 36 percent who say they are worried about the quality of public schools in general. Another 42 percent say they are equally worried about schools in general and schools in their community.

Voters overwhelmingly support good public schools across the nation. Nine out of 10 say it is personally important to them to ensure good public schools both locally and nationwide with a strong majority of whom say it is extremely important at the community level (90 percent important, 57 percent extremely). Even at the national level there is strong support (93 percent important, 58 percent extremely). Eight out of 10 voters, across all demographic and political subgroups, say it is personally important to them to have good public schools, with a majority of this group saying that it is extremely important. Again, although all voters support good schools, younger voters (under 45) and college-educated voters are more intense in their support of quality schools than are older voters and those without a college education.

Not surprisingly, parents of children under 18 are more intense in the emphasis they place upon good public schools than voters without children under 18, although a majority of voters without children in the home still believe good public schools are extremely important. Mothers are more likely than fathers to say good public schools are personally extremely important to them (9-point gap on community schools, 16-point gap on nationwide schools). Ironically, less frequent voters (and those who do not vote in school board elections) assign some of the highest importance to schools both within their communities and nationally. So broader efforts to increase voter participation would mobilize support for schools.

Whole Public Believes in Guarantee of Quality Education for All

Not only are voters committed to public education, they also believe it is possible to guarantee quality public schools for all children. Ninety-six percent of voters agree all communities should have quality public schools, and 91 percent of voters agree every child in America should be guaranteed a quality public education. Support for quality schools holds across the electorate, and more than eight out of 10 voters from every demographic subgroup agree all communities should have quality public schools and guarantee a quality public education for every child. Education is a bipartisan issue, and voters support ensuring a quality public education for all regardless of party ties (although slightly more Independents and Republicans believe this can be accomplished at the local level than at the national level).

Models of Community Action

Community Planning for School Improvement

The Lincoln Public Schools Foundation (LPSF) in Lincoln, NE, is an example of a local education fund utilizing the power of information to encourage more public involvement and responsibility for public schools. In 1998, in partnership with the Gallup Organization, LPSF surveyed 1,000 Lincoln community members and released the report *Lincoln Speaks*. The poll delved into what the Lincoln community believes constitutes a quality education, their understanding of education finance, and priorities for education.

Using the baseline information, LPSF drafted an Action Plan and launched two public-engagement initiatives developed from community-identified needs—a study on Teacher Quality and Student Performance, and the Community Learning Center Network (CLCN). Currently the Foundation is gathering data for the study, focusing on determining locally relevant measures of teacher quality while working to highlight the critical role of quality teachers. The CLCN is an effort to utilize the schools as a service delivery point for a wide range of community needs by forming partnerships with community care organizations. After identifying the needs of different neighborhoods through focus groups and intensive community assessments, LPSF has provided grant funding, administrative support, and technical assistance to four pilot sites. Neighborhood-specific programs range from encouraging home ownership and supporting long-term renting to counter the disruption felt by constantly relocated children to after-school academic enrichment programs for students and classes for adults to further develop their employment skills.

In efforts to systematically engage the public the Foundation also sponsors an initiative that matches principals at schools with community leaders seeking a more direct connection with public schools and a series of community conversations that include informal, open-ended meetings between the superintendent and community members. Building on *Lincoln Speaks*, LPSF has recently conducted a new survey of 1,200 residents to ensure their Public Engagement program stays aligned with the Lincoln community.

The Public's Responsibility for Public Education

Most Important Responsibilities: Paying Taxes and Helping One's Own Child

When voters think about taking action and responsibility, they tend to focus on traditional approaches to civic involvement over acts of volunteerism and charity.

Voters state that the most important way they can take individual responsibility for the quality of public education is to ensure that one's own child succeeds in school (25 percent), followed closely by paying taxes to support public education (22 percent).

As one female focus group participant said, "I would [advocate] for my own children. If every parent would do it, we wouldn't have this problem." A white male focus group participant continued, "It means that if you have a child in public education, to take responsibility for your child, and know what your child is doing. If your child can't read, you should know your child can't read."

Becoming as informed as possible about education issues (14 percent), pressuring elected officials to fix the schools (13 percent), volunteering in the schools (8 percent), and giving money to organizations working to increase school resources (4 percent) are seen as less important actions individuals can take. Strikingly, 11 percent chose all of the above.

Men are six points more likely than women to think ensuring one's own child succeeds is the most important responsibility. This is especially true among voters ages 18-24, with these young men 11 points more likely than their female counterparts to emphasize taking responsibility for one's own child.

Most Important Public Responsibilities

	Overall	18-24 Years old
Ensuring that one's own child succeeds	25%	25%
Paying taxes to support public education	22%	16%
Becoming as informed as possible	14%	18%
Pressuring elected officials to fix the schools	13%	11%
Volunteering in the schools	8%	13%
Giving money to organizations	4%	3%
All of the above	11%	11%

While voters under 45 think the most important way to take responsibility is to ensure your own child's success (27 percent), those over 45 split between that action and paying taxes (22 percent and 23 percent respectively). Racially, white and African-American voters feel the most important way to take responsibility is to ensure your child's success, while Hispanic voters split between this option and pressuring elected officials (21 percent and 20 percent respectively). Voters with children under 18 are significantly more likely to think ensuring their child's success is most important (31 percent), while voters with no children under 18 believe it is more important to pay taxes (24 percent), followed by responsibility for one's own child (21 percent). Private school parents place the greatest importance on ensuring their child's success (39 percent), followed by pressuring elected officials (19 percent) and becoming as informed as possible (17 percent). While public school parents also place taking responsibility for their child's success first (31 percent), they then follow this by paying taxes (20 percent) and becoming informed (15 percent). Income is also a defining factor in how one takes responsibility for public education. Voters who make over $40,000 state that ensuring one's child succeeds is the most important responsibility (29 percent). Meanwhile, voters who make less than $40,000 split between paying taxes (24 percent) and ensuring their child's success (22 percent).

Community Action for Public Schools

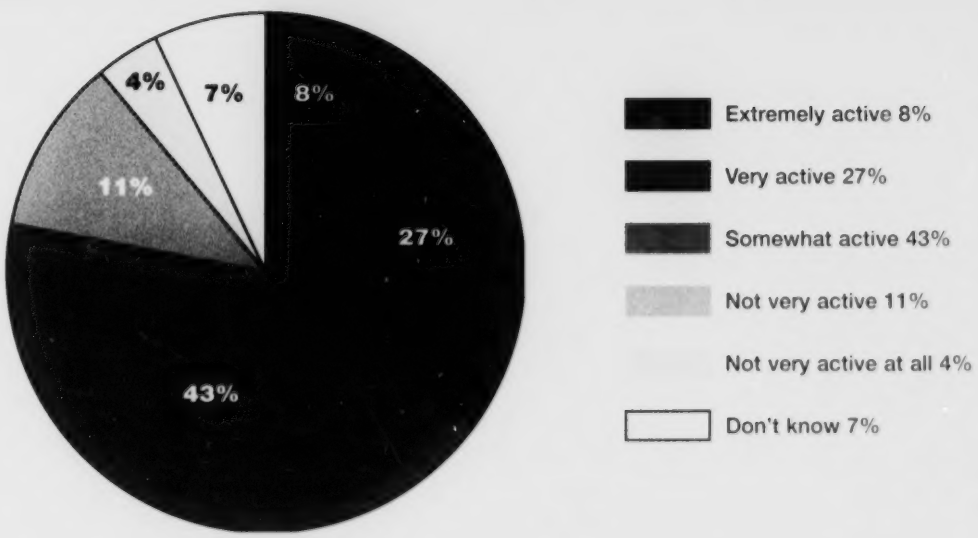
Communities Are Somewhat Active
At most, people see others playing only measured roles in advocating for quality of life issues, including education, in their communities.

A third of voters say people in their community take an extremely or very active role in improving the quality of life in their area (35 percent very/extremely active, 8 percent extremely active), while almost six out of 10 say people in their community are at most somewhat active (58 percent not active—43 percent somewhat active, 11 percent not very active, 4 percent not active at all).

Overall, there is a strong correlation between perceived community activism and class, marital, and parental status. Groups most likely to say people are active in quality of life issues include: college-educated voters, parents of children ages 18 or younger, and wealthy households. Latino voters are somewhat harsher in their views of their community activism. Only 27 percent of Latinos say people in their community take a very active role compared to 36 percent of whites and 32 percent of African Americans.

Most Take Some Responsibility for Schools
When asked specifically about education, only 22 percent of voters say people in their community take a lot of responsibility for

How Active Is Your Community in Improving the Quality of Life in Your Area?



ensuring quality public schools (69 percent a lot/some), while 24 percent of voters say their community members take only a little or no responsibility at all for ensuring there are quality schools.

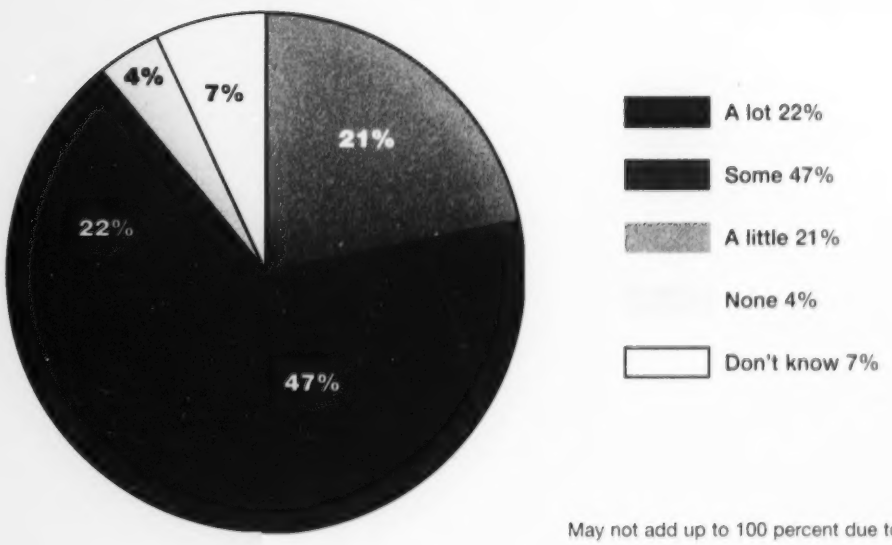
Voters resemble one another across gender and generational lines. However, we see a number of the same patterns discussed earlier, with college-educated voters (28 percent) more likely than non-college-educated voters (18 percent) to say their community members take a lot of responsibility for education issues. Seventy-four percent of parents of children 18 or younger say their community members take responsibility for ensuring quality schools (28 percent say a lot) compared to 66 percent of voters without children 18 or younger in the home (18 percent say a lot).

Additionally, while six out of 10 Latino and African-American voters say their community members take responsibility for quality public schools, greater numbers of white voters say that members of their community take responsibility for educatuion (70 percent). Racial differences are even more pronounced among young white 18-24-year-olds with 74 percent saying their community takes a lot/some responsibility for schools while only 49 percent of young minorities say the same.

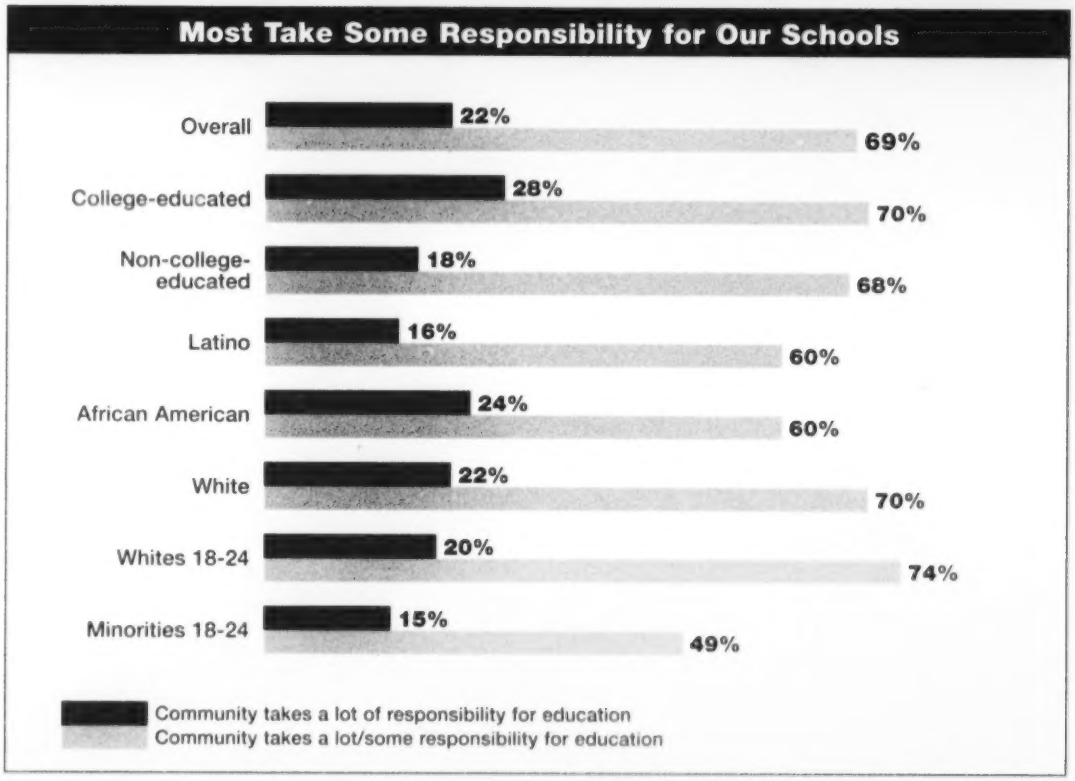
Half Say They Are Active

On a more individual level, voters are split on their reported level of their own involvement. Half of voters say they are involved in helping to make public schools better—49 percent of voters say they are involved (16

How Much Responsibility Does Your Community Take for Quality Public Schools?



May not add up to 100 percent due to rounding



percent very involved) compared to 51 percent who say they are not (28 percent not involved at all). Again, we see different levels of activity among people of different ages, class, and marital and parental status (although no differences by race or party identification). Voting is an important threshold for participation—only 33 percent of non-voters are involved compared to 56 percent of voters.

While men and women respond in relatively equal numbers, younger voters are significantly more likely to get involved on behalf of schools than their older counterparts. Voters ages 30-39 are most likely to get involved, while seniors are least likely.[1] Not surprisingly, parents of children under eighteen are much more likely to say they are involved (66 percent) than voters without children (38 percent involved).

Public Would Like to Be More Involved

Half of voters (50 percent) say they would like to be more involved in education issues in their community, while three out of 10 voters (29 percent) say other issues are more important to them, and they do not want to be more involved in education issues in their community. Interestingly, voters who say they would like to be more involved tend to be those groups who are already the most active on education issues, especially women and parents of children under 18. Unmarried mothers are the one exception; although they are not already actively engaged in education issues, a disproportionate percentage

[1] Regression analysis shows parental status (T=5.3), college education (T=5.6), and voters ages 35-64 (T=2.8) are the strongest predictors of reported involvement.

say they would like to be more involved.

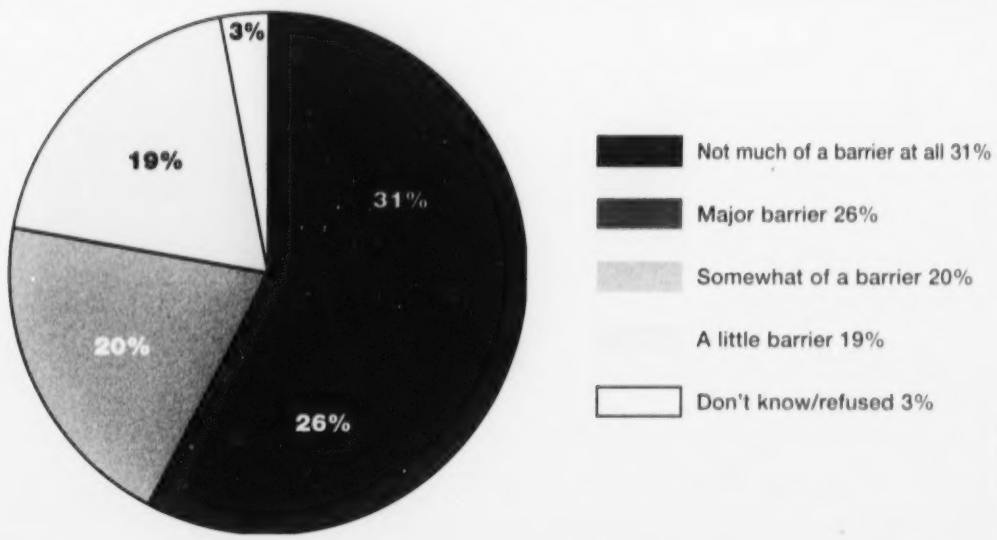
Additionally, we see significant gender differences with 55 percent of women saying they would like to be more involved in education issues, compared to 45 percent of men. Women aged 18-24-years-old are much more likely (63 percent) to want to get more involved than are young men (44 percent). Again, age and educational attainment are significant indicators with younger voters (59 percent to 41 percent), college graduates (57 percent to 46 percent), and parents (69 percent to 39 percent) significantly more willing to get involved on behalf of public education issues than others.

Barriers to Taking Public Responsibility

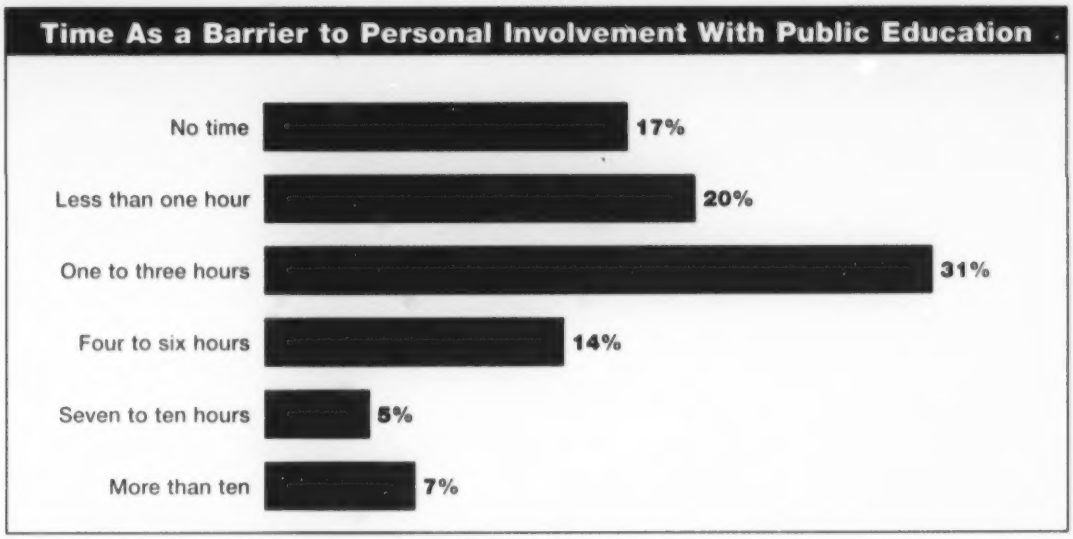
For all their good intentions when it comes to public education, voters name a number of barriers that prevent them from becoming more involved in public education issues in their communities. Time is the number one barrier as voters are busy balancing work and family demands. At the top of their list of barriers, voters cite a lack of time and busy work schedules (31 percent), followed distantly by no children in school (6 percent), too old/poor health (6 percent), lack of information/not knowing what to do (5 percent), no interest (5 percent), the teacher's union/board of education (3 percent), money (2 percent), politics/bureaucracy (2 percent), other issues are more important (2 percent), and parental involvement (2 percent).

Moreover, when asked specifically about the time crunch, just under half of voters (47 percent barrier) say time is at least somewhat of a barrier to their involvement in public education, a quarter of whom (26 percent) say it is a major barrier. Nearly three in five parents (57 percent) say time is a barrier (with 33 percent calling it a major barrier) compared to two in five non-parents (37 percent with 23 percent saying it is a major barrier.) Seniors are unique in that while they

Time As a Barrier to Personal Involvement With Public Education



May not add up to 100 percent due to rounding



are least likely to say time is a barrier, they also are less likely to want to get more involved and often cite failing health and old age as obstacles to involvement.

When probed further on why they feel they do not have the time to be more involved in public education, half of voters volunteer busy work schedules (50 percent), followed by too many other obligations (10 percent), family responsibilities (9 percent), other issues are more important (5 percent), too old/poor health (5 percent), single parent (2 percent), already involved in the schools (2 percent), no kids in school (2 percent), work far from home or the schools (1 percent), and work multiple jobs (1 percent).

The poll reveals that we cannot turn to those we have traditionally relied on to make public schools better for all children. As one focus group parent explained, "All of these things that you are talking about are good, and we'll all sit around here and [agree], but we'll also say, 'I hope somebody else does it.' Because I don't have the time. That's the reality."

"A lot of people are working later into the evenings, so some parents may not have the opportunity to put in two or three hours a night or to join the PTA. That's why it is important that other people in the community take a role," said an African-American man.

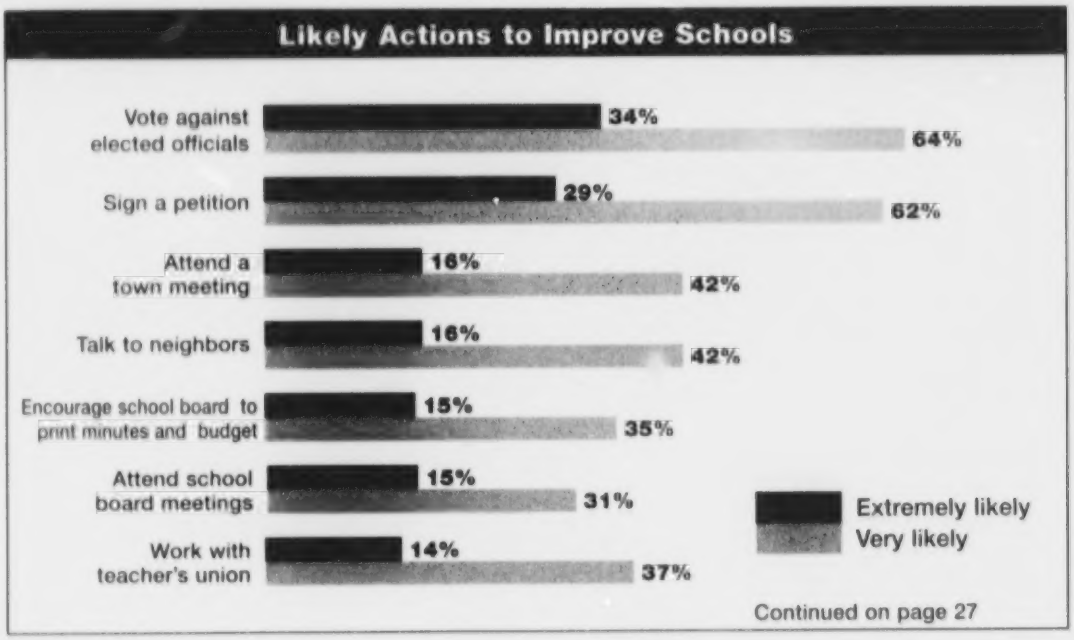
Finally, voters are honest in estimating how much time they really have per week to be involved in education issues, and five in 10 say they have zero to three hours per week to spare. Only a quarter of voters say they have more than four hours to give. Mothers and parents of younger children especially feel that they have little time to spare—69 percent of mothers and parents of children under five say they have under six hours for public education.

Not Personally Equipped

Focus group participants had a hard time deciding how they would get involved and work for quality public education. Some respondents suggested involving parents, volunteering, voting, paying taxes, sending their own children to public schools and many also admitted to "not knowing where to start." As one white woman in a focus group noted, "If you see trash, you can get that fixed in a day or two. Fixing a school is going to take years and years, and people don't know where to begin. I wouldn't have a clue where to start." Another man commented, "The things you are saying sound nice, and we'd like to do it, but we are not the authority." Yet another remarked, "You have to trust in others to do that. You can vote, and you can do things like that, you can pay your taxes, but you can't do that [ensure school facilities are physically sound] yourself." A Latino focus group participant asked, "I would question what you expect me to change. Or what can I do that would work?" Participants are looking for guidance about what to do. They do not personally feel equipped to undertake improving public education—it is too daunting of a task. However, as one African-American man in a focus group said, "I think if people knew the school system's bad, they know where to go vote, and when the elections are, where all of this information is, I think the people would respond."

Popular Actions Focus on Little Time Commitment

When asked to take specific actions, voters are less enthusiastic and less likely to take actions that they perceive will require a great time commitment on their part. As noted earlier, many voters state that they lack the time to get involved and a majority say they can only commit less than three hours a



Continued on page 27

"We need to make sure we vote for the right people and to put people in public offices that have the same goals about education." —*African-American focus group participant*

"To make a difference is to elect the appropriate officials and governing body, that's the only way the community can make it happen. You can't make these things happen on a direct basis, you have to elect the right people." —*White focus group participant*

week to education issues. Specific actions that garner the most support are those that require little time on their part—voting or signing a petition. Actions which require more of a personal commitment or which require more skill and knowledge are less popular and less likely to be undertaken—writing letters, participating in committees, or door-to-door contact. As one man observed, "Going to vote and punching a ticket only takes like five minutes, that's nothing compared to going out and marching, or writing a letter or something like that." They are most likely to vote against elected officials who want to make cuts in education (64 percent extremely or very likely, 34 percent extremely likely) and to sign a petition related to education (62 percent extremely or very likely, 29 percent extremely likely)—these are the only two actions which garner more than a majority of support.[2]

Respondents were most likely to say they would vote against elected officials, followed by paying more attention to the actions of their local school board. Hispanics also responded to instituting a system to grade schools on their performance because "you've got be a watch dog." As one man said, "To make a difference is to elect the appropriate officials and governing body, that's the only way the community can make it happen. You can't make these things happen on a direct basis, you have to elect the right people."

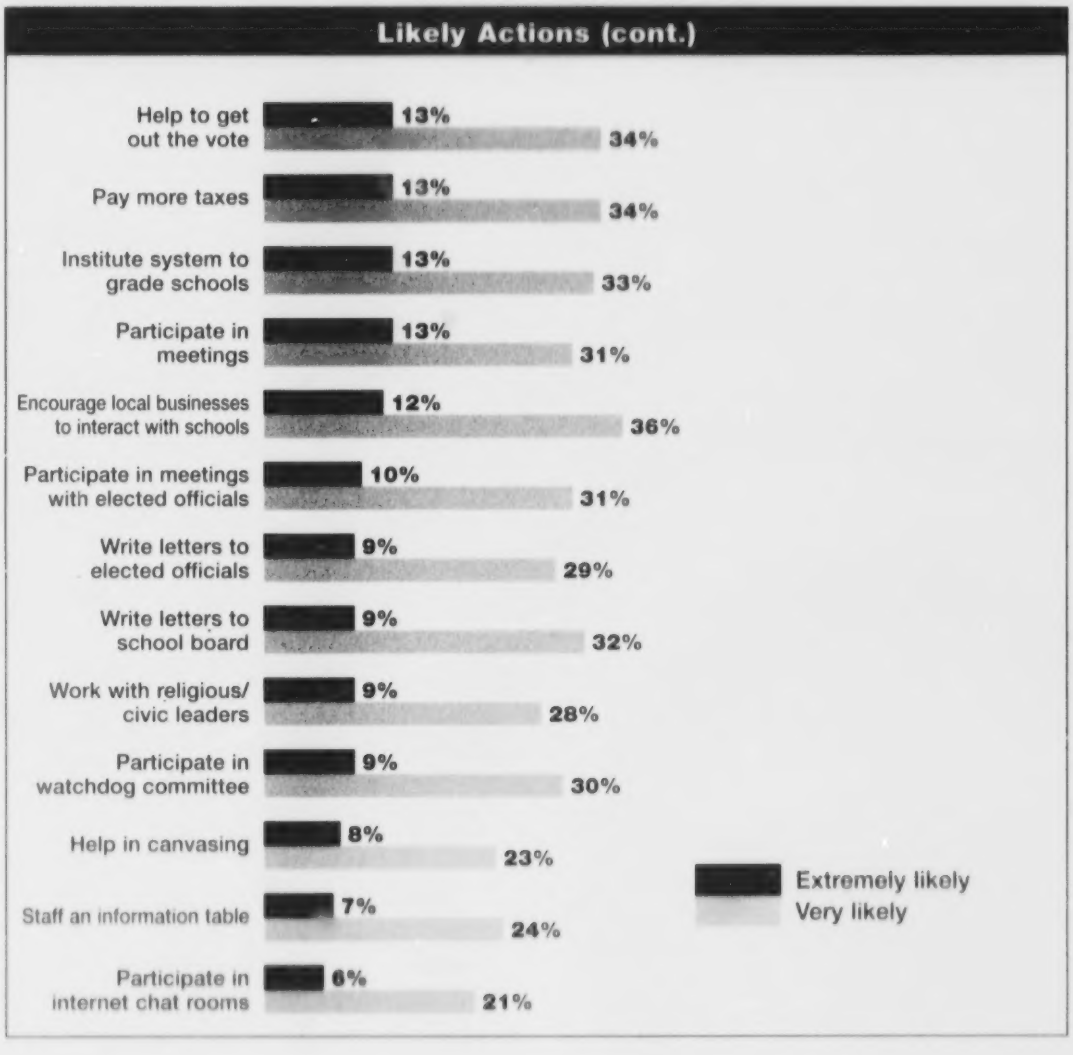
Voters and focus group participants were less enthusiastic about paying more in taxes, marching in a rally or writing letters to the editor, sending money to national organizations that provide support to schools, creating a community recognition day, or serving on an advisory board—many actions which they admit they do not have the time or the inclination to undertake. As one man noted, "I don't even write a card to my mother, I just don't write, it's that simple."

A Latina explained her dislike of sending money to a national organization, "You don't see the effect. You don't see where your money is going," she said. An African-American woman said she "wouldn't take the initiative" to create a community recognition day, while another concurred, "I probably would attend recognition day, but I probably would not do it."

Every demographic subgroup places voting and signing a petition at the top of their list and there is little variation among the groups. Every demographic subgroup is willing to take these actions. Not surprisingly, however, less-frequent voters drop-off in terms of voting against elected officials (38 percent likely) but are still very willing to sign petitions (50 percent likely). This suggests non-voters feel alienated from the process, not that they are just unwilling to get involved.

On a second tier, voters say they would be likely to attend a town meeting to learn how schools are performing, and to talk to

[2] The individual actions that are favored here still constitute public, rather than private, actions.



neighbors about local education issues.

As one woman stated, "It's a good way to get information and it's also a good way to find out what other people in your community think about the information."

On the next tier a third of voters place the following actions—attending school board meetings, encouraging the school board to print its minutes and itemized budget in a prominent public space, working with other groups, helping institute a system to grade school performance in their community, paying more taxes to put toward public schools, and encouraging local businesses and employers to interact more with education.

They are least likely to staff an information table on education at neighborhood or community events (24 percent—38 percent not at all likely), and to help in mailings or participate in door-to-door canvassing (23 percent—36 percent not at all likely).

At the bottom of the list, the public is not interested in participating on Internet bulletin boards or chat rooms dedicated to education reform (21 percent extremely or very

likely—44 percent not at all likely). Even 18-24 year-olds are less likely to enter Internet chat rooms than to participate in other ways.

Some Americans Are More Willing to Become Involved

Fortunately, the poll data revealed that the Americans most likely to take an interest in supporting school improvement are not just parents. America's most education-oriented voters include college-educated, married, upper-income, younger adults, and parents of children under 18. Among those who wish to become more involved are unmarried mothers who are currently not engaged in education issues. Other studies show that younger adults are increasingly taking an active role in improving the quality of life in their communities by volunteering. Meanwhile, the desire to take civic action for education appears to decrease as people get older. A greater percentage of those under 45 said they were extremely or very likely to take specific actions than did those over 45.

College-Educated Parents Most Active; Latinos Most Community Oriented

Parents and those from 30 to 49 years are most likely to take action. Frequent voters are also more likely to take action than less-frequent voters. Strikingly, college graduates and parents are more likely to be action oriented than other groups and are more open to a broader range of actions. Also, Latinos are more likely to attend local meetings, lobby local businesses, and talk to neighbors about education issues than their white and African-American counterparts but are less likely to take other actions. This suggests a unique messaging strategy is needed among the Latino community. Seniors are also less likely than their younger counterparts to be action oriented and are only marginally willing to vote against elected officials (55 percent likely) and to sign a petition (53 percent likely).

Models of Community Action

Minority Achievement and Race

The Durham (N.C.) Public Education Network (DPEN) is working with the entire community to galvanize support for minority students to overcome the obstacles they face in schools and to help them achieve. DPEN has organized a series of open meetings, opinion surveys, and planning sessions to alert the public and elicit their support. Proposed actions reach out to all levels of community, engaging county agencies to work with families to help students get the most out of school, businesses to form partnerships for quality teacher recruitment, and churches and civic groups to improve outreach programs such as after-school tutoring. There will be a culminating community "education summit" in May that will result in a plan for action to be implemented in June. In the past, DPEN has created a Community Guide to the Durham Public Schools Budget that was published in the *Durham Herald Sun*.

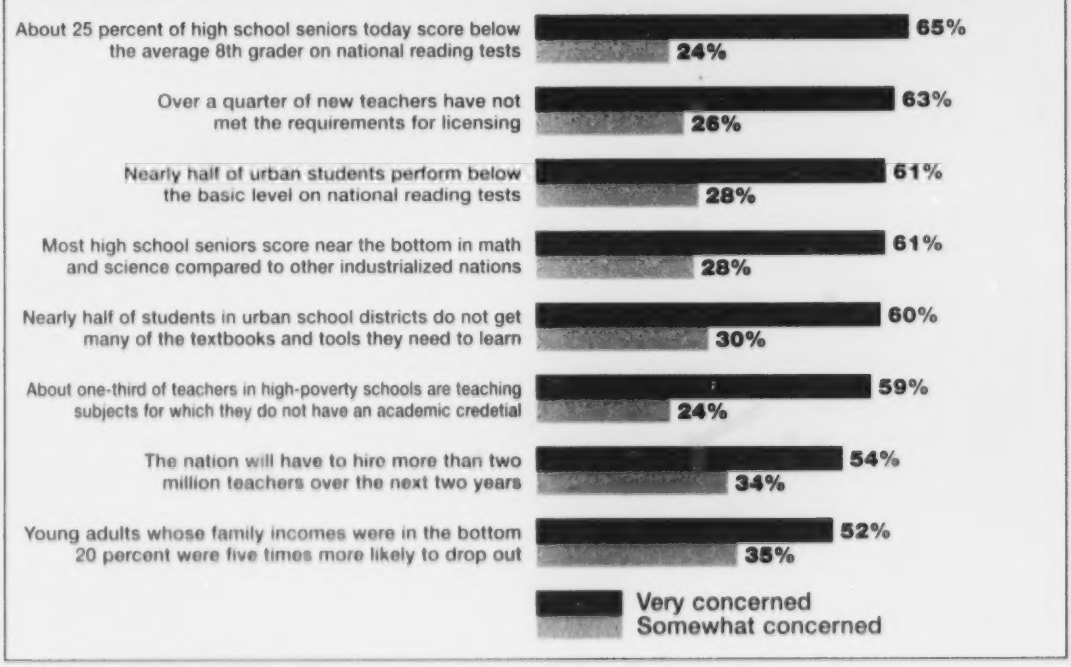
What Most Motivates the Public to Act

Voters are worried about the state of public education and they worry that children in America are falling behind and not learning what they need to succeed. Information that most motivates voters centers on teachers and test scores. They clearly worry about indicators that other children are in trouble as well as their own. Voters are most concerned by the issues shown in the following chart.

All demographic groups place nearly identical concerns in their top tier. Women are more intensely concerned than men by all of these facts, but all voters share similar concerns about the quality of the education children receive and the quality of the teachers in the schools.

Voters with children under 18 also show slightly more concern than others with their top concerns that 25 percent of seniors score below average 8th graders in reading, and that only a quarter of teachers meet licensing requirements. Although rural, urban, and suburban voters have the same concerns about student achievement and teacher quality, suburban voters show a greater

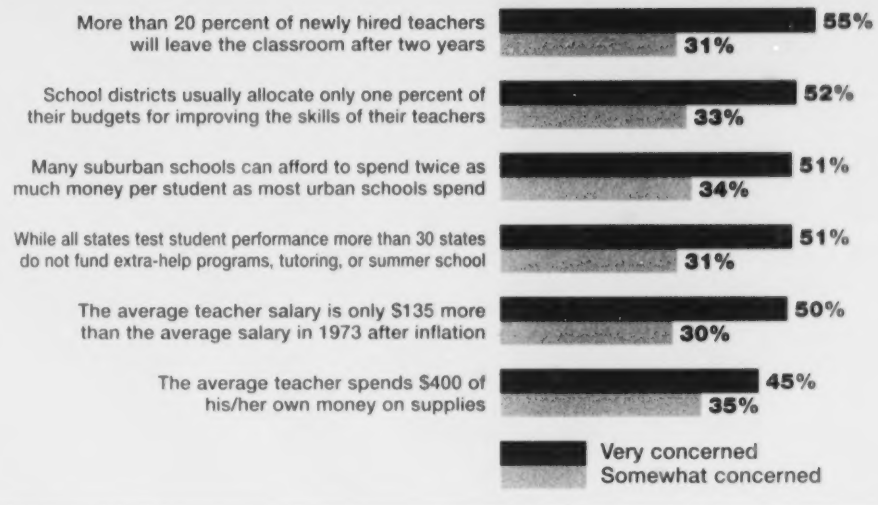
Top Motivational Information


About 25 percent of high school seniors today score below the average 8th grader on national reading tests
65%
24%
Over a quarter of new teachers have not met the requirements for licensing
63%
26%
Nearly half of urban students perform below the basic level on national reading tests
61%
28%
Most high school seniors score near the bottom in math and science compared to other industrialized nations
61%
28%
Nearly half of students in urban school districts do not get many of the textbooks and tools they need to learn
60%
30%
About one-third of teachers in high-poverty schools are teaching subjects for which they do not have an academic credetial
59%
24%
The nation will have to hire more than two million teachers over the next two years
54%
34%
Young adults whose family incomes were in the bottom 20 percent were five times more likely to drop out
52%
35%
Very concerned
Somewhat concerned

degree of concern along with African-Americans voters.

African Americans and Hispanics place slightly higher concerns on the fact that most seniors score near the bottom in math and science compared to other countries and that nearly half of urban students are below average in reading. Voters who have most recently experienced high school (18-24 year olds) are most concerned by the fact that nearly half of urban students are below average in reading. Seniors and Republicans place a greater concern on the fact that currently only a quarter of teachers meet licensing requirements. White voters are most concerned about teacher qualifications and that 25 percent of seniors score lower than the average 8th grader.

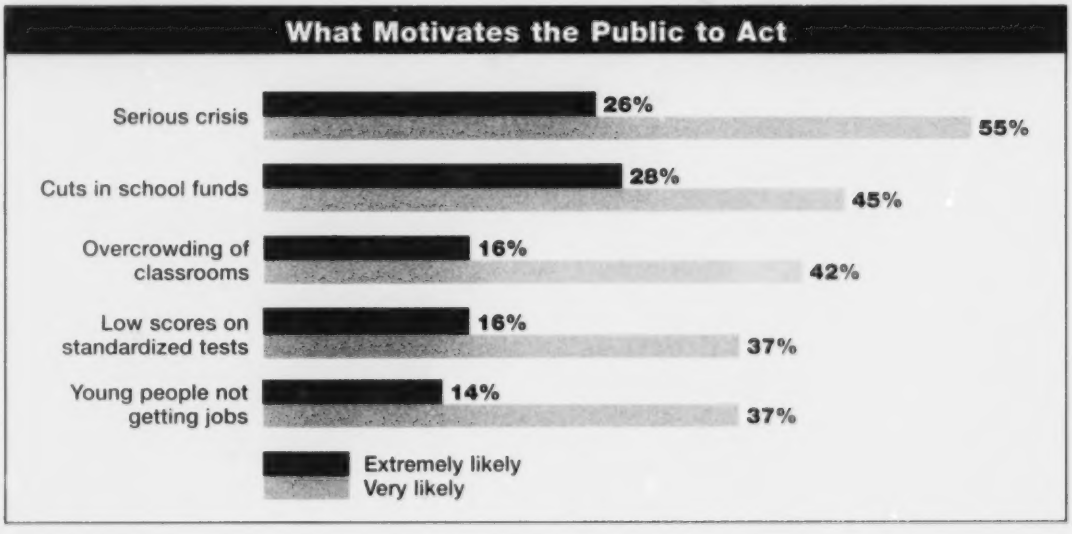
Top Motivational Information (cont.)


More than 20 percent of newly hired teachers will leave the classroom after two years
55%
31%
School districts usually allocate only one percent of their budgets for improving the skills of their teachers
52%
33%
Many suburban schools can afford to spend twice as much money per student as most urban schools spend
51%
34%
While all states test student performance more than 30 states do not fund extra-help programs, tutoring, or summer school
51%
31%
The average teacher salary is only $135 more than the average salary in 1973 after inflation
50%
30%
The average teacher spends $400 of his/her own money on supplies
45%
35%
Very concerned
Somewhat concerned

Crises and Cuts Lead to Action

Despite their attention to school quality news, voters are not yet at the stage where they are willing to commit their time and energy to improving public schools. The only scenario in which a majority of all voters say they would be likely to take action on behalf of public schools would be if there were a serious crisis, such as a shooting or threatened state takeover (55 percent extremely or very likely, 26 percent extremely likely). This engages even seniors and non-education-oriented voters. A plurality of voters say they would take action if cuts in funds affect schools (45 percent likely) or if classrooms were overcrowded (42 percent). They are less likely to take action if they see young people not getting jobs or not being admitted to college (37 percent) and contrary to current rhetoric about high-stakes tests, the public would not take greater responsibility if students scored low on standardized tests (37 percent).

Some focus group participants also remarked that in order for others to take notice of the plight of public education there would need to be a backlash against what is currently happening and a sense that we have hit rock bottom. As one white woman explained, "You need enough people, in the right age, that feel like there needs to be a change. And that's what happens, there's enough people, that they feel like things had to change. Something big has to happen, like Columbine. That was such a big thing. All of a sudden, everyone's worried about their safety in school."



Priorities for Public Schools

Ensuring access to quality public education is a core value for voters, and as such, they have multiple priorities for improving public education. Voters place at the top of their list of priorities for school reform: raising teacher quality (30 percent), followed by equalizing funding between rich and poor schools (18 percent), raising standards for all students (17 percent), strengthening community involvement (15 percent), and linking schools with health, law enforcement, and other community services (5 percent).

Focus group participants emphasize teacher quality and the need to increase teachers' salaries in order to attract more qualified candidates. A white focus participant said, "I think you've got to pay teachers like you pay ball players. A teacher should be making, let's say the average salary is $30,000 or $40,000, a teacher should make $75,000-$80,000 a year. That's the most important thing, the education of children." According to an African-American woman, "You have some excellent teachers but then you have those in both public and private schools who are only there to collect a paycheck. They are the ones who are passing our children…just to get rid of them, especially if the kid is what they call a problem child."

Differences can be seen along racial lines, and African-American voters are most likely to focus on equalizing funding between rich and poor schools, while white voters look to raising teacher quality. Latino voters split between raising teacher quality and equalizing funding. "We're such an advanced country… We should have a much better system. It's pretty unequal between [schools]." expressed a Latino man. An African-American man declared, "Everyone's education should be even, or balanced, and we all pay the same amount of taxes. The kids that live in the county shouldn't be privy to better education because he's a county kid rather than a city kid." Also, parents of public school students were twice as likely as private school parents to see a need to equalize funding.

Models of Community Action

Teacher Quality

The Wake Education Partnership (WEP) in Raleigh, N.C., is helping to spur greater dialogue around the critical issue of teacher quality through the Wake Task Force on Teacher Excellence. The task force was formed by WEP and others in the community to better understand how to recruit and support a high-quality teacher workforce in Wake County's public schools. To accomplish its charge, the task force was divided into special teams, one of which prepared the report *All for All: Teacher Excellence for Every Child*. The report offers short-and long-term strategies for recruiting and retaining teachers, i.e., to improve instruction and address public concerns. A poll commissioned last year by WEP found that while 94 percent of county residents felt that having caring teachers was an important quality of a "very successful" school, only 56 percent felt that their public schools had caring teachers. Other task force teams focused on other critical tasks, including developing local surveys to determine teacher satisfaction and issues related to teacher turnover, and devising a local index to identify and assess the qualities of effective teachers in the county's schools.

Public Information Needs

Not surprisingly, the information that voters want on public education is information that is not time consuming and that is relatively simple to grasp. A majority of voters say they would be most interested in receiving information on candidates running for the school board (57 percent extremely or very interested, 22 percent extremely interested) and in receiving ratings on schools in their community compared to other schools in the state (54 percent, 23 percent). They are less interested in receiving school budgets (44 percent, 18 percent) and school board minutes (35 percent, 13 percent). Contrary to stereotypes, half of young women want information on school budgets.

Additionally some focus group participants admit to needing more information on public education, but they are not sure where to turn. Many Latinos feel they have the information they need to make judgments about public education. Currently, they say they get their information on the news or through neighborhood newsletters, through friends, at the schools, in meetings, or talking to teachers. However, when it comes to specific information necessary to make good decisions on school board elections, local elections, or school budgets, many do not feel knowledgeable. They would like to see information sent to them or on a website or placed in areas they frequent, such as the grocery store.

The Public Seeks Information on Quality and Teachers

When voters think about the type of information that might be useful in assessing the quality of public schools in their community, voters are looking for information that addresses their concerns about public education – the quality of the education the students are receiving and the quality of the teachers in the schools. Voters think information about teacher qualifications would be most useful to them for assessing the quality of public schools (69 percent extremely or very useful, 28 percent extremely useful), followed by comparisons of school performance, including graduation and college-attendance rates (63 percent, 24 percent). All demographic groups would find both of

Models of Community Action

School Budgeting

Just over a year ago, the Metropolitan Nashville Public Education Foundation researched, printed, and disseminated *Common Cents: An Independent Guide to Metro Schools Budget*. The report provided the public with crucial reader-friendly information on how the school system spends taxpayer dollars, thereby deepening both the community's understanding of and involvement in setting budget priorities for the district.

these types of information useful; especially younger college educated voters, younger Hispanics, and voters with children under 18. College-educated voters rate all forms of information higher except for reports from family and friends.

In a second tier, voters say they would find useful state report cards on school performance (58 percent, 19 percent), reports from family and friends about school performance (55 percent, 18 percent), and comparisons of student achievement indicators with other schools in the nation (54 percent, 18 percent). They would find less useful the percentage of students taking advanced placement and accelerated courses (47 percent, 11 percent).

The Public Trusts Those Closest to the Situation

When it comes to who best can provide information needed to help local public schools, voters trust those they perceive as closest to the issue and who are more likely to be approachable—teachers, principals, parents, and the PTA. Whether talking about organizations in the community or in the state, voters come down on the side of teachers, school principals, parents, and the PTA. Voters say they are most likely to trust teachers (60 percent a great deal or a lot, 23 percent a great deal), followed by parents (57 percent, 22 percent), the PTA (59 percent, 20 percent), and school principals (51 percent, 19 percent). In a middle tier they place school superintendents (47 percent, 17 percent), school boards (46 percent, 15 percent), students (44 percent, 14 percent), community organizations (43 percent, 10 percent), and neighbors (39 percent, 12 percent). Very few trust business leaders (26 percent, 7 percent), elected officials (26 percent, 8 percent), and local newspapers (32 percent, 9 percent). College graduates are slightly more likely to trust the PTA (23 percent a lot among college grads and 18 percent a lot among non-college grads) and school principals than their non-college-educated counterparts (24 percent and 17 percent). Republicans are less trusting of teachers (53 percent), though half still say they trust them. Latinos are less trusting of school superintendents and school boards.

Who Americans Trust for Information on How to Help Local Public Schools

	A great deal/ a lot	A little/ not at all
Teachers	59%	39%
Parents	57%	41%
The PTA	56%	41%
School principals	51%	47%
School superintendents	47%	50%
The school board	46%	51%
Community organizations	44%	53%
Neighbors	41%	58%
Students	41%	57%
Local newspapers	32%	65%
Business leaders	26%	69%
Elected officials	25%	73%

Methodology

The Public Education Network in partnership with Education Week *commissioned Lake Snell Perry & Associates to conduct a multi-part research project on the public's role, responsibility, and resolve to improve public education and to take action in their communities.*

Focus Groups

Unlike surveys, which produce quantifiable results, focus groups provide impressionistic, qualitative data. Focus groups are used to uncover the nuances of respondents' opinions, including their feelings, beliefs, and perceptions. Lake Snell Perry & Associates conducted three focus groups (among white, Latino, and African-American adults) in Baltimore, Maryland on November 9, 2000. All groups were of mixed gender.

National Survey

Lake Snell Perry & Associates designed and administered a national phone survey using professional interviewers. The survey reached 1,175 registered voters nationwide.

The survey was conducted between January 8, 2001 and January 15, 2001. Telephone numbers for the survey were drawn from a random digit dial sample (RDD) for the base sample and oversample of African Americans and from listed samples for the oversamples of 18-24-year-olds and Latinos. The sample was stratified geographically by state based on the proportion of voters in each region. The interviews consisted of a base sample of 800 registered men and women voters with oversamples of 125 registered Latino voters, 125 registered African-American voters, and 125 registered 18-24-year-olds. The oversamples were weighted into the base sample so that each respondent in these groups reflects his or her actual contribution to the total population of registered voters. The sample size with these weights applied is 800 cases. Data were weighted by age and education to reflect the attributes of the actual population of registered voters. The margin of error is +/-3.5 percent.

Copies of the topline data and the questions, as well as an adaptation of the question suitable for community use, can be found on the web at http://www.PublicEducation.org.

Notes

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